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Old Spies and Cold Peas

By JEFF STEIN

A HUTCH OF RABBITS WAS MUSTERED FOR SECURITY duty in the kitchen of the Holiday Inn in McLean, Virginia, in early October, pretesting samples of fried chicken, roast beef, and cold peas as the Association of Former Intelligence Officers sat down for a luncheon at its fifth annual convention. It wouldn't do to have America's finest ex-spies knocked off in one fell swoop by a KGB chef.

The association, founded in 1975 by senior CIA covert operator David Phillips (Cuba, 1960; Brazil, 1964; Chile, 1973), appears to be having a vintage year after five years of sour grapes. Membership has increased tenfold from an original 250 to 2600 former CIA, FBI, and military intelligence agents and officers, and this year, for the first time, corporate membership has been solicited and enthusiastically received ($500 a year gets a company three free memberships). Lockheed was first in line.

A marked departure from earlier years, when the more prominent brethren were busy ducking subpoenas or television network crews, the mood at this year's convention was both joyous and combative, apparently thanks to the bracing Cold War tingle in the air and the solid prospects for new laws making it a crime to disclose the name of a CIA officer learned from publicly available sources.

This year's convention of spies found cause for joy in every corner. Key "anti-CIA" liberals Frank Church, George McGovern, Birch Bayh, and John Culver were in deep trouble in their reelection bids (and went on to lose). The Supreme Court had grabbed Frank Snepp's "ill-gotten gains" from *Decent Interval* back for the government. The Congress had repealed the Clark Amendment prohibiting covert intervention in Africa on the side of apartheid and had retreated from its early promise to write a strong CIA and FBI charter. As former CIA intelligence chief and present Reagan adviser Ray Cline crowed to the assembled CIA, FBI, and military men, "We are on the upgrade at last."

Or are they? A few days of milling around at the conference, dipping into panel discussions and chatting with a number of intelligence officers in the lobby or bar, suggests that the U.S. intelligence community remains mired in delusions about itself and the world about it. Its chronic and crippling problem remains its inability to distinguish between intervention and intelligence, security and repression. In the real world, moreover, its solution to these problems is not as harmless as hiring rabbits to pretest food for a convention banquet.

A series of sharp exchanges at the conference is instructive. On Friday, October 3, a panel on Soviet Bloc intelligence operations unveiled its star performer, the former chief of "disinformation" for Czech intelligence, Ladislav Bittman. Chaired by Ray Cline, the panel sought to draw out of Bittman a pattern of omnipotent KGB and Eastern Bloc efforts to recruit Western journalists and plant false information in the press.

The issue is important. In recent months, the devil theory of international relations has made a big comeback. The Soviet Union is said to be not merely throwing its weight around and protecting its vital interests, like any other great power; it is evil unto itself. A corollary to this grand design is the apparently fashionable view that Russian "moles" have burrowed into the loose fabric of American life, poking, climbing, and chewing their way into the highest echelons of the U.S. press and the intelligence community itself. Thus, an editorialist's support for human rights cannot merely be a sensitive response to much of the world's state-organized cruelty; it has to be "proof" of seduction by Soviet intelligence's "false flag" technique of wooing liberals to communist aims.

Czech defector Bittman, with Leninesque goatee and speaking in "Mission: Impossible" Eastern European accents, played the role assigned to him in the panel discussion. He titillated this special audience, producing chuckles when

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he said he was "delighted to be here among all you spies." Under prodding from Ray Cline, Bittman narrated a string of Moscow- and Prague-controlled propaganda operations. One would have thought the Western world had survived the past three decades only through some sort of magic potion.

But CIA oldtimer Harry Rositzke braced the panel and the audience with a few short questions, bringing the fantasy back down to earth. First, he asked, could Bittman pinpoint one single deception that resulted in a change of U.S. policy? Bittman mumbled that he could recall only operations abroad: "It has more effect in the Third World." Yes, of course, Rositzke pressed, but "can you think of any disinformation you have detected in the American press in the last three to six months?" The audience stirred uncomfortably and Cline looked straight ahead. Rositzke was making the obvious point that harping on such black propaganda operations—ours or theirs—obscures the fact that international problems can have *real* social and political roots, apart from the intelligence tricks of the enemy. In the end, Bittman was forced to admit that he would "have to think it over. I'll come back to it later."

Cline's overemphasis on the "tricks" of this cunning Soviet enemy spilled into the panel on terrorism as well. The former CIA Intelligence Division chief insisted that "it's a coordinated effort from Moscow with our friends in the Caribbean [read: Havana] deeply involved." Cline, without offering any specific data, assured the room that Moscow was training terrorists from all over the world and then directing their activities. This brought a wide variety of sharp responses from other intelligence specialists.

At the back of the room, in an angry, whispered exchange during a break in the panel, a red-faced Howard Bane, recently retired as chief of the CIA's department on terrorism, spat out: "We've got to get Cline off this Moscow control of terrorists. It's divisive. It's not true. There's not one single bit of truth to it. I should know," Bane said, waving his hands, "I just left that place a few days ago." Harry Rositzke received Bane's comments sympathetically. "It's that far-right stuff, that's all," he said to Bane. "It's horseshit."

The two CIA old pros were incensed by Cline's unforgiveable sin as an intelligence professional: He had politicized his analysis, skewered it to fit this year's fashion. "Divisive" was the key epithet.

Cline's emphasis on Moscow's control of world terrorism was calculated, like phony estimates of missile strength, to produce a "terrorism gap." This would create the need for a greater counterterrorism effort and a rebirth of political policing agencies like the operations CHAOS and COINTELPRO disruption programs of the 1960s and early 1970s. "If you want to believe in the conspiracy theory of terrorism," said Conrad Hassel, the FBI's director of antiterrorism instruction, to Cline, "well, you've got it, but there's no evidence for it." Cline was enraged.

The myth making by people like Cline—a generally respected former CIA official—and the landslide victory of Ronald Reagan imply that far worse is in the offing. In a lengthy conversation this past summer with Reagan intelligence adviser Richard V. Allen, for example, I proposed the following scenario for his incoming administration.

Let's say, I began, that you are faced with "another Nicaragua on January 20. Put it in another country, say, El Salvador, where you have a Left-led coalition of businessmen, farmers, students, and clergy pitted against an isolated, narrowly based junta from which there are daily defections. Wholesale civil war has broken out. What," I asked Allen, "do you do?"

Allen crossed one leg over the other, looked to the ceiling and then back at me, and answered, "Well, first of all, we would like to know what secret role the Carter administration played in toppling Somoza."

One can only deduce from such an answer that the Reagan administration will be fully committed to the same conspiracy theory of history put forth by Cline and many others in the intelligence community. In such a tilted world, there is little place for subtle shifts in national aims, the rise of legitimate demands from the hungry and dissatisfied, or for an understanding that much of the world would like to wrench itself free of both superpowers' tentacles.

"Superpatriots are the worst intelligence officers," Bittman confided to me after the spotlight was off him and we chatted in the hotel lobby. "They bend

the information to their preconceptions." All in all, he said, the U.S. has little to fear from the combined might of the Soviet KGB and its Eastern European sister agencies. "American culture and American business have so penetrated most of the world," he said, "that the Soviets do not have much of a chance. American money talks."

Loosening up, Bittman developed the theme further, to the consternation of former CIA officers who gathered around us as we talked. "Intelligence work is dirty work," he said. "I quit when I decided I could not recruit a young French journalist who was enthralled with Czech socialism. I knew he would work five or seven years for us, but, finally, he would be arrested. He would then perhaps spend the rest of his life in jail."

Most of the former agents, spies, saboteurs, airlift specialists, and accountants who made up the ranks of the AFIO convention this year preferred to fix their sights on the Congress, the press, or *Covert Action Information Bulletin* as the source of their problems, sort of like the Moose Lodger at a weekend in Atlantic City who blames his drinking problem on his boss. As keynote speaker and current CIA director Frank Carlucci put it, "there are no friendly books about the CIA." (In fact, the Center for National Security Studies in Washington has compiled a list of eighteen generally or fervently pro-CIA books—among them, David Phillips's *Night Watch*.)

And for all the throat clearing about the need for "good intelligence" at the conference, one telling incident revealed that the CIA's principal instincts remain the same.

Louis Wolf, one of the editors of *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, had been issued press credentials to cover the convention. This, of course, was less a democratic gesture than a decision by the crafty David Phillips that a whipping boy might be handy. And predictably, from time to time a martini-soaked former intelligence officer would harangue Wolf from the floor of the convention, waving his arms in a drunken, impotent outburst. Through all this, the shy, soft-spoken Wolf, who had done alternative service in Laos as a conscientious objector working among refugees, sat quietly at the press table.

At the end of one day's session, Wolf gathered up his things and walked from the press table out through the convention room's rear doors into the lobby. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw three men ominously get up from their seats, flash dark looks at each other, and follow him out. Worried, I decided to follow them. In the lobby, they quickened their pace to catch up to Wolf, but not before he was out onto the rain-slicked street and hailing a cab. They stopped under the portico.

The three men, all of them tall and stocky, flexed their forearms and stared at Wolf as he stepped into the taxi, 100 feet away.

"I wish he had been run over," one said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah," said another, and all three emitted a roll of guttural laughs.